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ABSTRACT

This investigation explored relationships between parenting stress, dyadic adjustment, and social support in families with normal healthy infants of 18 months of age. It was expected that parenting stress would be high when social support was absent and that this would be related to poor marital relationships. Participants were 34 families consisting of a mother, father, and their biological child. In 14 families, the child was the first born. Each parent completed the Parenting Stress Index, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, and the Family Social Support Scale. High parenting stress was found to be negatively related to marital adjustment. However, there were no significant relationships regarding social support. Findings support the need for further analyses of the effects of parenting stress and poor dyadic adjustment on child development. (RH)

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Relationships Between Parenting Stress, Marital Stress, and Social Support for Mothers and Fathers

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ABSTRACT

Many variables can affect the early caregiving enviroment, and subsequent social and cognitive development, according to Belsky (1984). The purpose of this study was to view relationships between parenting stress, dyadic adjustment, and social support in families with normal healthy 18 month old children. This presentation is part of a larger ongoing longitudinal study attempting to examine Belsky's Process Model of Parenting (1984). It was expected that parenting stress would be high in the absence of social support and this would be related to poorer marital relationships. High parenting stress was found to be negatively related to marital adjustment, however, no significant relationships were found regarding social support. Findings support further analyses of the effects of parenting stress and poor dyadic adjustment on child development.

PROBLEM

As children develop a sense of independance during the second year of life, parenting stress can be quite high (Kagan, 1981). If this is combined with relationship stress between the parents and a lack of social support it can potentially effect the parent - child relationship. A weakness common to other investigations of stress and parenting is the focus on major life events such as divorce (Hetherington, 1989), illness (Crnic, Ragozin, Greenberg, Robinson, & Basham, 1983), etc. Little attention has been given to how the day to day life of the parents (e.g., constraints on time, role overload, marital satisfaction) may influence the child rearing environment. Such was the emphasis of the present study in which parenting stress was compared with marital stress for mothers and fathers when their child was 18 months of age. In addition, parental perceptions of social support were assessed as possible buffers of stress.

This investigation is part of a larger research program longitudinally examining characteristics of the caregiving environment and their relationship to parent - child interactions every six months from a child's 18 month birthday to their 36 month birthday. Identifying such variables is of importance to the quality of the caregiving environment, which in turn may affect infant-caregiver attachment formations and other child developmental outcomes (Belsky, 1984).

It was expected in the present study that the marital relationship would be affected by parenting stress. In addition, it was expected that the more social support parents report, the less parenting stress they would report and the better their relationship with their spouse would be. While the current presentation is based solely on self-report and is strictly correlational it should be noted that longitudinal follow-up is currently underway and includes actual behavioral observations of parent-child interactions.

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty four families consisting of a mother, father and their biological 18 month old child participated in this study. In fourteen families the child was the first born and in the remaining twenty families the child was a later-born child. Families were recruited from birth lists published in the local paper in upstate New York. Only families with children free of serious medical problems were included. Mothers ranged in age from 21 to 41 with a mean age of 30.1. Fathers ranged in age from 23 to 39 with a mean age of 30.6. Hollingshead social class scores were computed based on parents' education levels and occupations and the mean social class for the sample was a 3.9 on the five point scale.

Measures

Each parent independently completed the following questionnaires when their child was 18 months old during home visits as part of the larger research project:

1.) The Parenting Stress Index (PSI) (Abidin,1986) which consists of 101 items measuring six child and seven parent characteristics (See **Table 1** for means and standard deviations).

2.) The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spainer, 1976) which consists of 32 items measuring four components of dyadic adjustment (See **Table 2** for means and standard deviations).

3.) The Family Social Support Scale (Dunst, Jenkins, & Trivette, 1984) which consists of 18 items measuring the degree to which different sources of support are helpful to families rearing a young child. Five subscales of support are derived from the scores (See **Table 3** for means and standard deviations.)

RESULTS

Correlations indicated that Total Parenting Stress was negatively related to Dyadic Adjustment for mothers but not for fathers. No significant relationships were obtained regarding Social Support.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were computed predicting Dyadic Adjustment Subscales from Parenting Stress Subscales. These analyses were computed separately for Mothers and for Fathers. Social support scores were not included as no relationships between Total Social Support Scores and the other measures were found in the correlational analyses.

Mothers

1. Health ($p<.004$) and Depression ($p<.001$) predicted Marital Satisfaction for mothers (R-squared = .39).
2. Relationship with Spouse ($p<.0004$) and Parent's Sense of Competence ($p<.0005$) predicted Marital Consensus for mothers (R-squared = .42).
3. Child Reinforces Parent ($p< .01$) predicted Marital Cohesion for mothers (R-squared = .17).
4. Relationship with Spouse ($p<.002$) predicted Affective Expression for mothers (R-squared = .28).

Fathers

1. Depression ($p<.05$) predicted Marital Satisfaction for fathers (R-squared = .12).
2. Parent's Sense of Competence ($p<.01$) and Depression ($p<.006$) predicted Marital Consensus for fathers (R-squared = .31).
3. Social Isolation ($p<.001$) and Child Demandingness ($p<.0005$) predicted Marital Cohesion for fathers (R-squared = .42).
4. Restrictions Imposed by Parental Role ($p<.03$) predicted Affective Expression for fathers (R-squared = .15).

In all cases for both parents relationships between the varibles were negative and indicated that the more Parenting Stress reported the lower the reported marital adjustment.

CONCLUSIONS

These results offer empirical support for the relationship between Parenting Stress and Dyadic Adjustment. Abidin (1986) reported that three studies have examined this relationship using the measures in the present study. However, two of these studies are unpublished Doctoral Dissertations (Hart, 1985, and Smith, 1986 cited by Abidin, 1986) and the other is a study of handicapped children (Kazak, 1984, cited by Abidin, 1986). Thus, the present study of normal children is a unique contribution to the area of parenting and marital adjustment. The lack of significant relationships with regard to social support may be due to more global coping styles, which is currently being considered in this ongoing longitudinal investigation.

Assessment of marital adjustment as affected by stress is important because it could potentially offer insight for training programs for parents who are experiencing stress and have poor marital relationships.

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Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for PSI

CHILD DOMAIN	Mother		Father	
	M	SD	M	SD
Adaptibility	24.8	3.9	25.5	4.7
Acceptibility	12.2	2.3	12.9	2.9
Demandingness	18.6	4.8	17.8	4.2
Mood	9.2	3.5	9.8	2.6
Distractibility	24.8	4.0	25.4	4.2
Reinforces Parent	9.1	2.8	9.5	3.2

PARENT DOMAIN	Mother		Father	
	M	SD	M	SD
Depression	18.8	5.4	17.4	4.3
Attachment	12.2	2.8	13.4	2.8
Restrictions of Role	18.9	5.5	17.2	3.9
Sense of Competence	27.5	4.4	25.3	4.4
Social Isolation	13.0	2.9	12.6	2.6
Relationship w/Spouse	16.7	4.0	15.7	4.3
Parent Health	12.1	2.4	10.4	2.3

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Dyadic Adjustment Scale

	Mother		Father	
	M	SD	M	SD
Dyadic Satisfaction	33.3	3.9	34.1	3.7
Dyadic Consensus	49.5	6.4	49.1	4.9
Dyadic Cohesion	16.5	3.4	17.0	2.8
Affectional Expression	8.7	1.8	9.0	1.8

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations for The Family Social Support Scale

	Mother		Father	
	M	SD	M	SD
Total Support Scores	21.4	6.9	20.2	7.8
Formal Kinship	11.8	0.6	11.7	0.6
Informal Kinship	11.1	0.6	11.1	0.7
Social Groups	10.5	0.5	10.3	0.4
Professionals	11.0	0.7	10.9	0.8
Professional Groups	10.5	0.5	10.5	0.6